

IDENTITY OF THE ACEHNESE SOCIETY IN THE COMMERCIAL DIASPORA OF GROCERY STORE IN MALAYSIA

Muhammad Ichsan

Southeast Asian Studies, Universitas Indonesia
isan.mdlife@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This journal contains the identity of the Aceh people in diaspora of grocery store (Kedai Runcit) in Malaysia. Diaspora plays a role in the establishment of a cosmopolitan commercial culture. The spread of humans from various parts of the earth to other parts of the world, meeting each other, communicating, forming networks, is ultimately a meeting between cultures, mutual appreciate, mutual respect, and mingling. Given that interaction between people is one of the important factors in strengthening relations between countries. The Indonesian diaspora is also expected to strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. The form of actualization of the runcit diaspora is a type of commerce that is easy to engage and can contribute to development. The study of these findings is focused on a review of the cultural identity of the Acehnese society in the grocery store diaspora in Malaysia. Among the Diaspora minorities in Malaysia, there are a small number of Acehnese migrants after the conflict and post-tsunami. Malaysia is known as the second multi-ethnic country after Singapore in the Southeast Asian Region. Researchers would look for samples of Acehnese people who have succeeded in creating new communities among ethnic communities, local Malays, ethnic Chinese, ethnic Indians who are the majority in Malaysia. Researchers would use the method of Literature Review and Netnography interview in data collection. The sample taken was Acehnese people who live or have a grocery store in Malaysia. The results of this research found that it is true that there is a diaspora process between the Acehnese people in Malaysia through commerce.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Identity, Commerce, Grocery Store, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The grocery store becomes a trend of cultural identity and trade competition between ethnic groups from generation to generation in neighboring Malaysia. The grocery stores are commonly found in densely populated central areas such as urban Chow kit Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang, Yan Kedah and suburbs such as Puchong, Putrajaya, Malaka with mixed ethnicities, such as ethnic Indians, Chinese, and Arabs who sell various primary and secondary needs for the local Malay community. Post conflict and tsunami in Aceh, the increase in both legal and illegal immigrants from Aceh who want to enter Malaysia is fairly high because they hope to stay there for a long time to get jobs and form their identity, culture, economy and social. One ethnic that can adapt to the local multi-ethnic community is the Acehnese.

The people of Aceh flocked to leave their native province of Aceh (Indonesia) inasmuch as the post conflict and tsunami, there are unavailability of jobs and family economic factors, so they were determined to migrate to Malaysia. There, Malaysia seems to be a hope and a new second home for neighboring people who are immigrants or who have been in diaspora for a long time. The cultural identity of Aceh there has long been formed because of the historical ties of the kingdom of Aceh Darussalam and the kingdom of the Malay Peninsula in the past. Making the identity of the Acehnese people in Malaysia can be easily accepted by their local Malay kin. The entry of Acehnese identity and trade culture has competition from ethnic Chinese and Indians who both trade grocery, the Excellence of the Acehnese Community however as the majority of the diaspora is Muslim, this is a significant consideration for the government in Malaysia because the scale of product quality is confirmed halal. Apart from this, the researcher highlights the process of the Acehnese people through the transnational route of the Malacca Strait in diaspora which is vulnerable to problems, but once again the identity factor, the influence of the strength of the community of trade entrepreneurs as well as culture make the Acehnese people easy to have a diaspora.

This Postmodern era, the Aceh Diaspora is counted since the end of the New Order era and the transition to the Reformation era. The end of the tensions of conflict between the RI and GAM through the Helsinki MOU peace in 2005, further sparked an intensive network increase among the Acehnese immigrant communities abroad relied on political, economic, ethnic, and kinship affiliations. Thus, the difficulties stemming from this conflict also results in the strengthening of feelings of shared destiny and solidarity between Acehnese ethnic groups at the transnational level (Antje Misback, 2012: 4). Politically, Chan and Evers (1973) argued that in Southeast Asia, there are two alternatives adopted in dealing with the problems of nation-building. One of those is to adopt a regressive identity (looking back) by reviving a long and proud tradition through comparisons with past glory days. Another option is a progressive identity (looking ahead), fostering a plan to improve the development of a society by removing the feudal or colonial shackles that underlie the formation of a socialist state (Mohamed Mustafa Ishak: 2016).

Regarding the past orientation, it could be said that the Acehnese are a group of people who are very proud of their past glory. As Ali said, when they are talking about customs, religion, politics or development throughout Aceh, the topic of conversation can be quickly colored by stories about the glory of Sultan Iskandar Muda of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam or the Kingdom of Peurelak and Samudera Pasai (Ali, 1999). This process has made Aceh as an Islamic region which is called as "Seuramoe Meukah" (Veranda of Mecca). In this context, Aceh becomes attached to Islam and Islam is attached to Aceh. As for the Islamization process, which includes the historical aspects of global maritime commerce in the Malacca Strait, Islam continues to transform into a social identity for the Acehnese.

Islam as the social identity of the Acehnese people was formed through a long historical journey in the Malacca strait trade route. According to Dhofier (Melalatoa: 2005), Islam has started to exist in the Aceh region since the first century Hijri, which has then been strengthened since the era of the Peureulak Islamic Kingdom, followed by the Pase Islamic Kingdom era and the Aceh Darussalam Kingdom era. For this reason, the grocery business community of the Acehnese is extremely proud that it is through them and their area that the religion of Islam

spreads in Southeast Asia. The pride is increased again by the attachment of Aceh's nickname as "Seuramoe Meukah" (Veranda of Mecca). The nickname is not only because of the depth of Islamic values in Aceh's life, but also because it is an area in which everyone from the archipelago who will perform the pilgrimage to Mecca first stop in Aceh to deepen their religious knowledge, as well as when they return.

Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) explained that cultural identity (or also called as ethnic identity) can be seen from at least two perspectives, such as cultural identity as a being (identity as being) and cultural identity as a process of becoming (identity as becoming). So from this, the identity of the Acehnese people has formed a new diaspora in this case the grocery store in several central trade areas of the Malaysian state as a process of diaspora and acculturation of global society, one of which is Acehnese ethnicity. Aceh's grocery activities have been in Malaysia for a long time, which focus more on selling daily necessities. Most of local people depend on markets and grocery stores to meet their daily necessities. (Siti Rahmah Awang: 2002).

The initial hypothesis of the research is that the acculturation of the Acehnese diaspora through the grocery store is no longer a dispute in the dynamics of Malay culture because they have a common identity and history. However, "Grocery Store" and the Identity of the Acehnese Community become a new competition for the grocery diaspora of the ethnic Chinese, Indian and Arab in Malaysia. The Acehnese diaspora is closely related to back and forth conflict of military emergency which has been going on since early 1999 – 2003. According to Anje Misback, the creation of an intensive network of migrants among Acehnese abroad which relies on political, economic, ethnic and kinship affiliations. Therefore, the difficulties stemming from this conflict also result in the strengthening of feelings of shared destiny and solidarity between Acehnese ethnic groups at the Transnational level. (Antje Misback, 2012: 4).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with Diaspora and Identity theory. Given that people to people interaction is one of the essential factors in strengthening relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. In term of this, the diaspora can be one part of the community or individuals who will keep contact between communities. Diaspora is often defined as residents living in another country. Diaspora today has an important role in international interaction, especially in encouraging cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia. The Indonesian Diaspora is also expected to strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. The researcher uses the concept from Missbach (2011, 2012) who defines diaspora as the process of identity formation of a group of individuals and communities outside their homeland as a form of aspiration and recognition in the midst of political conditions in the native and recipient countries. Diaspora has become an umbrella term for other groups such as migrants/exiles/refugees/expatriates.

The status of a person or group can be referred to as a diaspora not about the driving factors for migration or how long they stay, but the post-migration conditions and how the group adapts. The researcher also uses Doty's (1996) concept of national identity to position

the diaspora discourse into the debate on the power relations of the nation-state or agent-structure. Doty (1996) argued that identity boundary are not only limited in the form of territory, as well as political authority which is understood in the form of policy and regulation. The narrative of the boundaries of state sovereignty is actually a discourse of the authority that is ambiguous and uncertain, and is useful for distinguishing who is and is not part of the national identity. According to Doty (1996), sovereignty should be viewed in two ways: 1) focusing on the nation as a unit of analysis which has been seen as domestic politics; and 2) expanding the concept of sovereignty itself. This study seeks to implement the first point of the idea. The researcher uses a netnographic research strategy. In line with the increasing use of the Internet, the number of people using various communication technology devices that are increasingly sophisticated, the number of online communities that are formed continues to increase and become stronger. With the exponential increase in the presence of online communities in recent decades, cultural researchers have been trying to catch the true potential of the internet. The Internet has now become an important research field (Bowler, 2010). Research methodology with a qualitative approach to the online realm has been incorporated into the context of a broader methodology of online or virtual ethnography conducting ethnographic studies on online communities and groups (Bo'do, S., Siahaan, H., & Ida, R. 2019). Netnographic method is increasingly popular among cultural researchers, especially in the fields of marketing, advertising and communications. According to (Kozinets, 2010), online culture and community extends traditional ideas about research fields, such as cultural analysis and representation, from observation to locations, face-to-face interactions to technology-mediated interactions in online networks and communities and the cultural similarities (cyberculture) between them. In term of doing it, netnographic techniques based on the traditional idea about the research site, as a localized space, are outdated. Kozinets suggested that netnographic research sites could be meaningfully applied to computer-mediated interactions, a statement that has sparked debate, but is increasingly accepted.

Acehnese Diaspora in Commercial Context in Malaysia

The Acehnese who migrated (diaspora) to Malaysia since the sultanate era until now have triumphed (successfully) in the world of commerce and education. Almost in all states, Acehnese people can be found whom they succeed in commerce. (Acehtrend.com: 2018). Many Acehnese migrants and refugees rely specifically on kinship networks rather than rely solely on institutional assistance from the Malaysian government or official Acehnese groups. These kinship networks include cognation/hereditary and marriage. (Susan Pattie, 1999:85) labels these family ties as “the glue of the diaspora community”. (Antje Missbach, 2012: 87). Informal local networks provide an important interface for newcomers from Aceh. The post-conflict and tsunami era was accompanied by an economic boom due to the large waves of international aid. Unlike Acehnese diaspora in the West, Acehnese businessmen in Malaysia are interested in reviving business relations between Aceh and Malaysia. One of the new business initiatives is the Aceh Trading Center (ATC) which is managed by a number of former Acehnese students in Penang. ATC has two goals, namely promoting Aceh's agricultural products (such as coffee, palm oil, copra, areca nut and nutmeg) in Malaysia, and inviting

Malaysian investors to Aceh. As the cases of diaspora business initiatives shown above, despite there is a great enthusiasm, however few business collaborations between Acehese entrepreneurs in Malaysia and Aceh have resulted in. There is one rare exception, namely a joint venture involving the Aceh government and the Malaysian Federal Land Development Authority, (FELDA). (Antje Missbach, 255: 2012). According to Dr. Ali, the emergence of these successful Acehese-blooded merchants make the Malay ethnic group proud in Peninsula Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur, especially in Chowkit, is the place in which most of the Acehese are successful in commerce in Malaysia, said academic from Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Dr Mohammed Ali Haniffa, in an international seminar entitled "The Learning of Literary and Humanities Based on the Aceh -Malay Islamic Primary Archive and Genuine Local Heritage. The interesting term, he continued, the merchants still showed simplicity in their daily interactions. (Acehtrend.com:2018).

Aceh Cultural Identity in Grocery Store Business in Malaysia

1. History of the Acehese Commercial Diaspora in Malaysia

The Acehese who come to Malaysia, then settled and scattered in many areas, They get along with the local Malay community. In certain areas, they still practice Acehese customs, clothing, religious customs, and folklore. The area that is often the migration destination for Acehese people is Kedah, a country in northern Malaysia. This is because the two areas are located on the north coast, so that they become the entrance for ships going to the Malacca Strait. Aceh is located in the north of Sumatra Island, while Kedah is located in the north side of the Malay Peninsula. The author stated that the migration of the Acehese to Yan Kedah was most widespread for 1900-1915. This migration was because Aceh was involved in a war with the Dutch. In addition to the ulama, the migration of the Acehese to Yan was also carried out by traders. After declining in trade as a consequence of the war, the merchants began to migrate from Pulau Pinang to Yan.

2. Aceh Commercial Community as a Socio-Cultural Association in Malaysia

The conquest of the Kingdom of Aceh over the lands around the Straits of Malacca and the East Coast of Malay Land has left historical impressions in the form of culture, place name, and tombstone. In addition, the Acehese also migrates to the newly conquered place and then assimilated with the local community. Aceh's attack on Malacca in 1537 was not the starting point for the arrival of the Acehese in Malaya. Long before the attack occurred, Acehese had already crossed into the Malay Land, either to establish trade relation, seek new sustenance area, or to study or spread religious knowledge. Marriage relation has also been realized between the kingdom in Aceh and the kingdom in Malay land.

for work are sometimes paid with money, but some are in the form of rice. "That is how we survive, so we can pursue education in *dayah*," he said.

The situation of such an educational pattern has resulted in the failure of some traders (*ureung meudagang*). There are a lot of them whom they are not able to achieve the expected

results. However, those who are successful, besides they really master religious knowledge, their mentality is also quite resilience. People who have completed their education in *dayah* will go back to their home villages to teach their knowledge to the community. Missbach (2012) says: "Ulama, for example, study abroad and return to Aceh to teach." Related to this, Siegel (1969) also stated that the result of trading is that there is a change in a person, namely at first he was just a layman but later he became an *ulama*.

3. The Cultural Acculturation of the Grocery Store Commercial Society

Malaysia is a federated Islamic country which forms 13 states, 3 of which are federated territories; Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Perak, Selangor, Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Alliance Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Pahang, Sabah and Sarawak. So, until now Malaysia is popular as a multi-ethnic and plural country. Commerce and Immigration of the Global community also add to the spirit of development in the country. One of them is grocery store commerce. The trade of Acehnese grocery store has been widely established in peninsula Malaysia. After the Conflict and Tsunami in 2004 and Memorandum of Understanding between RI and GAM, many Acehnese people speculate in the neighboring country Malaysia. Acculturation has formed a new group of immigrants in addition to the large ethnic Chinese, Indian, Middle East, and finally Acehnese.

As a plural society, Malaysia is divided into 13 states and 3 federations, which are inhabited by three major ethnic groups, such as Malay, Chinese and Indian. Whilst in East Malaysia, indigenous tribes, such as the Kadazan, Iban, Murut, and Melanau are the original inhabitants who still maintain local tradition. From all the tribes above, China, which is a quarter of the population, is a pivotal player in economic activity. Most of them adhere to the three major religions of Mainland China, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Most of them speak Hokkien and Cantonese. Meanwhile the Indians, who speak their native languages such as Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Hindi are Hindus.

Well!, if we visit Malaysia, as if it is not considered complete if we have not looked in visiting the Acehnese market in Malaysia. It is divided into small retail trades (for example: sellers, wholesalers and grocery stores) and large scale retail businesses (markets, major markets, shops and malls, for instance).

The objective of the study is to identify the problems faced by Malay entrepreneurs in retail business, such as grocery store trader and mini market trader. The study also tries to identify the factors that determine the success of entrepreneurs who are running grocery store and Malay mini markets in the Hulu Langat area and provide suggestions that can be taken to improve the achievements of Malay entrepreneurs in the future.

Chow Kit is located at the northernmost of Tunku Abdul Rahman Street, but most Acehnese Merchants trade along Raja Alang Street which is adjacent to Safuan Plaza. Meanwhile, grocery stores are in order after that, as well as the herbal medicine stalls, which also belonged to the Acehnese, line up neatly. It's easy for us to know the Acehnese traders there, because all of them use the Acehnese language in speaking, just like the Acehnese Market in Aceh except when there are Malay buyers.

4. Cultural Change in the Grocery Store Commercial Community

To run trade, quite a lot of Acehnese have left their native areas. In the Acehnese language, people like this are called *ureung meuniaga*. Among them, there are those who settle in a new place, some are back and forth. Regarding migration with commercial purposes carried out by the Acehnese, it has been stated by Hussain (1984). According to him, before Francis Light arrives in Pulau Pinang, the Acehnese have already been in this area. They come as traders in an open area which at that time was known as Teluk Jelutung (now called Kampung Pulau at Perak Street). The Jelutung Bay (*Teluk Jelutung*) area includes Rauna Village (Counter Hall Street) and Kebun Lama (Langkawi Street and Terengganu Street).



Grocery Store (*Kedai Runcit*)
(Photo: 1)



A Grocery Store for the Acehnese Diaspora Community in Malaysia
(photo :2)



Rows of the Grocery Store of Aceh people in the area of Chowkit, Kuala Lumpur
(photo :3)

Grocery Store, according to the perception of the post-independence generation, is just a shop that sells daily necessities. The grocery stores that they visited are Chinese and Indian grocery stores. These stores sell rice, sugar, flour, pepper, onions, biscuits, kitchen appliances, *besen*, sandals and snacks. The grocery stores are also dark and cramped. In 2019, the retail value was RM112 billion. Unfortunately, six hundred thousand of the income of the grocery business was controlled by foreign nomads. The big markets except Mydin (the name of a Malaysian retail company) today are all foreign owned. In the 80s, there was a market called a hypermarket. Names like Hankyu Jaya, Makro and Carrefour opened up their big premise so that there was a response that this hypermarket would swallow up small shops. Then, there also were names such as Aeon and Tesco. The traditional grocery stores eventually lost to the greatness of hypermarkets and the first 7-Eleven opened in Bukit Bintang in 1984. The 24-hour multi-purpose shop changed the perception of the grocery store. In the Covid era, the prestige of a grocery store is slowly getting more and more favored by many parties.

CONCLUSION

The Acehnese who migrated (diaspora) to Malaysia since the sultanate era until now have triumphed in the world of commerce and education. Acehnese people who are successful in commerce can be found in almost all states. The Kingdom of Malaysia cooperates with Acehnese grocery store traders to distribute cheap goods to the public. As a commerce and acculturation diaspora of the many countries chosen by the people of Aceh, Indonesia, as a place to live, run business, or study, it turns out that Malaysia is the most popular. According to the chairman of the KMAK Aceh - Malaysia, Datuk Mansyur of the 640,000 Acehnese now in Malaysia, about 250,000 of whom own a shop which is from wholesale retail shop, wholesale fruit shop to wholesale herbal medicine shop. The majority of the workers in the Acehnese-owned business units are also Acehnese or local Malays. Acehnese communities in Malaysia are active in carrying out social activities, including commemorating Islamic

Holidays. In Malaysia, the retail industry is one of the most important industries and contributes greatly to the country's economic growth. This sector has always provided a large endowment in terms of its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (KDNK). Many Acehnese migrants and refugees rely specifically on kinship networks rather than relying only on institutional assistance from the Malaysian government or from official Acehnese groups. These kinship networks include cognation/hereditary and marriage relationships.

REFERENCES

- Awang, S. R., Hashim, M., & Mohd Roslin, R. (2002). Stages of using notification technology in the retail industry in Malaysia. *Indonesia*. Penerbit Ombak, Jakarta
- Ali, A. (1999). "Aceh Past, Present and Future" . in: Widjanarko T, Sambodja AS (ed). *Free Aceh in debate*. Jakarta: Citra Putra Bangsa.
- Castles, S; H. De Hass, dan M.J. Miller. (2014). *The Age of Migration: International Population movements in the modern world*. New York: The Guilford Press
- Dhakidae, D. (2001). "Aceh and Papua, two complex problems with two types of settlement offers. In *Aceh, Papua*", Jakarta: Roots of problems and alternative conflict resolution processes. Jakarta: YAPPIKA
- Doty, R. L. (1996). Sovereignty and the nation: constructing the boundaries of national identity. *Cambridge Studies In Internasional Relations*, 46 (1), 121-147.
- Ennaji, Moha. (2005). Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco. *Springer Science & Business Media* pages.19-23
- Guanipa-Ho, C., & Guanipa, J. A. (1998). Ethnic identity and adolescence. *Retrieved February, 20, 2002*.
- Ilmawan, K. F. (2015). *Spatial Analysis of the Effect of the Presence of Franchise Minimarkets on the Turnover of Grocery Stores in Umbulharjo District, Yogyakarta City* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta)
- Hall, Stuart. (1990). "Culture Identity and Diaspora" in J. Rutherford, ed.. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Repsentation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: The Open University.
- Hall, Stuart. (1993). Culture, Community, Nation. *Cultural studies*, 7 (3), 349-363.
- Ishak Mustafa Mohamed. (2016). "Malaysian Nation Politics, Development of a Nation of a Compound Society", Universiti Utara Malaysia. Progressio, Jakarta.
- Kotler, P. (2005). The role played by the broadening of marketing movement in the history of marketing thought. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 24 (1), 114-116.
- Melalatoa, MJ. (2005). "Understanding Aceh: A cultural perspective. In: Pirous AD (ed). *Aceh returns to the future*" . Jakarta: IKJ Press.
- Missbach, Antje. (2012). "The long-distance politics of the Acehnese diaspora: An overview of the separatist conflict in Indonesia" . Penerbit Ombak.

- Prabowo, Aditya Ari. (2008). Konstruksi Identitas Budaya Masyarakat Imigran Turki di Jerman Dalam Film « Kebab Connection ». Thesis. Faculty of Cultural Sciences. Universitas Indonesia. <http://lontar.ui.ac.id/file?file=digital/127003-RB11P361ki-Konstruksi%20identitas-Literatur.pdf> accessed on April 25, 2013
- Santoso, M.Imam. (2014). “International Migration and Dual Citizenship Diaspora”. Paper presented on Seminar Diaspora and the Dynamics of Citizenship Concepts in Indonesia. Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia, Depok.
- Utami, C. W. (2010). Retail Management, Strategy and Implementation of Modern Retail Business Operations in Indonesia.
- Wong, D., & Afrisal, T. (2002). Political Violence and Migration: Recent Acehnese Migration to Malaysia. *Indonesia and Displacement*, 51-66.
- Wahlbeck, O. (2002), ‘The concept of diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (2): 221-238.

Websites

<https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/124224/KOLUMNIS/Apa-ada-pada-kedai-runcit>
<https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2019/07/18/catatan-dari-malaysia-koperasi-masa-datuk-mansyur-hingga-kisah-tiga-diaspora-aceh-beda-generasi>
<https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2014/06/26/ada-kampung-aceh-di-malaysia>
<https://www.kanal73.com/news/kedai-aceh-di-malaysia-sebuah-ikon-daganetnis-melayu/index.html>